Phatic Labor, Poor Theory, and Revisiting Empowerment in Cairo

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Theoretical work for this paper began as ethnography. Let me set the scene. It’s the 1990s and empowering women via microloans is all the rage. Poor people have been discovered to be productive, the informal economy is lionized as a development strategy, and microenterprise and microlending are on the rise. It is ten years before Mohamed Yunis will win his Nobel Prize for microlending and Grameen Bank, but Cairo is already flooded with dollars looking for women to empower. Those dollars and those new
concepts helped shape the field I encountered. Theory for this project begins with “aha”
moments of ethnography, when something goes against what your theory tells you should
be there, when you know something is important but you don’t know why or have the
concepts to explain it. These are the moments when experience in improvisation is as
important to an ethnographer as is training in classical social theory.

Here are some of those moments: driving into a neighborhood on the outskirts of
Cairo that looked like Pioneer Town, but in which stood row after row of workshops
whose owners spoke the rhetoric of Ottoman craft guilds, and row after row of
microenterprises whose owners spoke the words of empowerment and debt. There’s the
first time I visited a private bank called the National Bank for Development, on a tour
organized for NGO and development visitors, and landed in a room with young men and
women inscribing in pen the names of borrowers and occupations and amounts lent and
interest rates charged. There’s the realization that they were providing microloans to that
same Pioneer Town neighborhood I had just seen.

There’s the first time I went to sleep on a Thursday night with the shouts of boys
10 years old playing soccer under floodlights on the dirt street in front of workshops
(Thursday is payday in Cairo and a night of celebration.) These boys were workers in
neighborhood workshops, their families too far away for them to visit more than once a
month. I see these same kids running once again during the day, but now as laborers on
appointed tasks rushing from workshop to workshop, kinesthetic energy bursting out of
the labor relation or other times, spines bent over, trudging back to work carrying a
master’s ironed clothes, a message, a spare part for a machine broken down. All this
came more vividly into focus when another informant, a secretary for a development
consultant, mobilized this communication system to accumulate data on women’s networks that she could parlay for financing for the NGO to empower women she would later open. The paths those boys walked and ran and the channels they traced out among workshops, homes, and customers marked out paths for which I had no map or theory to decipher. How to make theory for these moments?

To an ethnographer like myself, “Notes toward a manifesto” for Poor Theory can read like a call for ethnography. What is ethnography but the process of paying attention to “murky, unsystematic practices and discourses of everyday life”? For me, fieldwork is a constant process of coming to grips with “the past in the present.” (What does it mean when the men I am talking to who produce inputs to a Mercedes Benz factory use terminology from the Ottoman craft guilds to express their ideology of worker relations?) Was not all this empowerment an argument about possible futures, in which some were being foreclosed and others actively imagined? In ethnography, the present is always “heterotemporal” and the ethnographer proceeds through “appropriations and improvisations.” Research among poor people in Cairo, moreover, shows the impossibility of conducting research as if “...advocating for the use of mud bricks and “local knowledge.” For ethnography is by now a ghostly presence (Schwab *) in most iterations of “local knowledge” that we encounter in fieldwork.

This paper draws on fieldwork carried out in Cairo in the 1990s and then more briefly in 2005. It is a return to the spring of empowerment, and the notion that women’s lives could be changed for the better by empowering through debt. When I conducted my original fieldwork in Cairo, which focused on the question of informal economy and the implications for sovereignty of the state of “developing” informality, tens of millions of
dollars were flowing into Cairo a year to empower via debt and enterprise. Empowerment of women via debt was a cornerstone of this project. But between 1995-2005, there was no real change in the gendering of productive space. The small enterprises of Cairo that are the mainstay of its economic life remained distinctly male. But other outcomes could be seen.

Social technologies that empowering through debt had spawned moved, over the course of a decade, into the private sector. By 2005, it was no longer anthropologists in the academy who were studying women’s and poor peoples’ networks and realizing what a vibrant source of income generation, survival, and even profit they were. By 2005, telecom companies investing in the booming cell phone business in Egypt (and elsewhere) studied the social networks of poor women and men to better design their products and marketing plans. Vodaphone, Visa, PayPlus, MasterCard, and Intel employed ethnographers to help construct infrastructure for telecom projects in the “payments space” those poor people had helped create (Maurer 2008). Important to this phase of the story were the connections and paths inscribed by boys running and walking across workshop streets, women traveling on broken down buses across the streets of Cairo to visit friends and family, and men hanging out chatting in coffeehouses. All that socializing and traveling around Cairo to visit that had seemed outside my conceptual frame turned out to be crucial. All that chat and all those paths traced visiting made up, I came to realize, a social infrastructure on which new economic projects in the global South were being constructed.

What theory can get us from empowerment to infrastructure? As a start, I turn to Malinowski’s concept of phatic communion from a classic paper on “primitive language”
(Malinowski 1936[1923]). With this concept, Malinowski shows how language such as gossip and chatting can be a means of establishing ties for their own sake, rather than for the purpose of conveying any information in particular. I bring together Malinowski with Marx to introduce the concept of “phatic labor.” I argue that this labor produces “communicative channels” that can potentially transmit not only language but all kinds of semiotic meaning and economic value. The period of empowerment finance, I will argue, made these communicative channels created through phatic labor visible as a “social infrastructure” upon which other projects oriented around the pursuit of profit could be constructed. I argue that these social infrastructures are collective goods that the critical work of ethnography can unwittingly help privatize or, conceivably, render available as public goods. I rely heavily in my account on the tales of three women from Cairo I came to know during my long-term fieldwork there in the mid-1990s.

‘Um Ibrahim and the Grand Central Coffeehouse

The neighborhood I referred to above was constructed at the beginning of the 1990s to house workshops relocated from other areas of northern Cairo that planners had decided were unsuitable for industrial and service workshops. The new neighborhood was missing many things when residents first arrived. Streetlights were few, streets were unpaved, and many workshops were without the water they needed to open for business. Workshop masters quickly organized themselves into an association to voice their interests directly and vigorously to the government. They went on strike to force the Municipality to finish the provision of essential infrastructure for their work: lighting, electricity, and paved roads. Workshop masters did not strike for a coffeehouse. And yet,
the coffeehouse [that coffeehouse in which the boys and men would sit and watch movies and drink coffee and tea and talk] was also part of that essential infrastructure.

In workshop neighborhoods of Cairo, the coffeehouse is a place where deals are made, information exchanged, workers located, and opportunities pursued. The coffeehouse is a beehive of sociality, where men from workshops chat and gossip with instruments of conviviality such as coffee, tea, and waterpipes (shisha). Workshop masters come to the coffeehouse to settle disputes, arrange deals, and learn about new customers. Workers share information about possible jobs and gossip about their current employers. Masters learn about supplies from new sources and whether workers with skills they need are available for hire. The coffeehouse has been called an “informal institution” of the labor market of Egypt (Assaad 1993). More broadly, it is a place where channels of communication in the public economic space of workshop communities come together and become visible, like train tracks come together in Grand Central Station in New York City.

‘Um Ibrahim contributed to the maintenance of that infrastructure. Her apartment was above the coffeehouse. Her furniture was simple but colorful, the walls of her apartment dotted with pictures of family members, framed posters of Alpine scenery, and framed surah from the Quran. There was a picture of ‘Um Ibrahim with her husband at their marriage, a picture of the couple with their two young children together with ‘Um Ibrahim’s mother, and a picture of Ibrahim when he was young. In one corner was a television and video player tucked away behind piles of video cassettes, which Abu Ibrahim brought home each day from the coffeehouse, where he showed them to children and adolescents who worked until late at night. Children came and went from the
coffeehouse: One might carry a flat of 24 eggs up the stairs while another carried down plates of sweets for the coffeehouse or hot food for sale in the pushcart run in front of the coffeehouse by Ibrahim.

Abu ‘Ibrahim’s family had been in the craft of sweets-making for many generations in their original home in a neighborhood of central Cairo. From the proceeds of the sweets she made, ‘Um Ibrahim took out money to cover the costs of running the household and gave the rest to Ibrahim towards his marriage expenses. Unlike many of her neighbors, ‘Um Ibrahim kept pretty much to herself. She stayed out of the back and forth of communication and exchanges that marked neighborly relations in this community. Other women I knew would always go to a neighbor if they needed something, but not ‘Um Ibrahim:

If I needed something like sugar I would never go to a neighbor. That wouldn’t look good! The wife of a coffeehouse owner, he’s got all that sugar in his shop, and she’s going around asking for sugar from her neighbors! No, that wouldn’t be good. If I need something, I go and buy it. I have little to do with my neighbors, I know them from the balcony, but we don’t go into each other’s houses.

‘Um Ibrahim moved around much less than her neighbors: she generally moved only from her house to her husband’s coffeehouse to her immediate relatives, and back again. This may have been due in part to a limp that made it harder for her to walk. But much as her life was oriented around her nuclear family and her time was spent inside the home, ‘Um Ibrahim was not a housewife. Her day was not spent reproducing labor-power to be sold on the market for a wage. As a loving wife and mother, ‘Um Ibrahim’s
affective labor and skills were crucial in creating the possibilities for her son to become a fully social man who could marry and head an economic enterprise, and for her husband to enjoy his reputation as a man of honor who had the resources and the temperament to help others in their times of need. But she did more as well. The coffeehouse is a place where practices of sociality integral to male productive work in popular communities of Cairo are prominently on display. ‘Um Ibrahim was a maintenance worker on essential infrastructure of economic life in Cairo.

**Wasta, Networks, and Infrastructure**

The notion that practices of sociality have outcomes, and that those outcomes are essential to the political economy of life in Cairo, has resonance in Egyptian native concepts. When Hoodfar’s informant, Um Hani, needed to get her family’s apartment connected to the water line, she went about this task in classic Cairene fashion. She went on visits. She visited her neighbors in turn until she found someone who knew someone in the right office to take care of this matter. “If I go not knowing anybody,” ‘Um Hani told Hoodfar, “they will not deal with me and send me from one office to the next and will ask me to return day after day. But if I know someone who knows the rules and knows the people, the whole thing may not take more than a few hours. Here nobody helps you if you do not have connections” (Hoodfar 1997:230). In this case, ‘Um Hani’s visits were interested. But ‘Um Hani had visited back and forth with her neighbors many times with no goal in mind. Most of the time, she and her neighbors were just being sociable. That did not contradict their statements about the importance of the connections that sociality forged.
When talking about connections and their importance, Cairenes often use the words ‘alaqat (relations) or wasta (intermediaries). The concept of wasta is pervasive in Egypt and many other Middle Eastern societies. Cultivating wasta entails great investments of time and energy among poor people but is not a phenomenon of the poor alone: Wasta is central to life among elites as well (Inhorn 2004). A concept similar to wasta is found in other cultures: The native concepts of guanxi in China (Kipnis 1997, Hutchings and Weir 2005) and nepotism in the United States (Bellow 2004) both refer to the importance of cultivating networks of personal connections in order to get things done. Wasta is sometimes glossed as corruption or patronage and is an object of concern for those studying the conduct of business in the Middle East (Hutchings and Weir 2005; Loewe, Blume, and Speer 2008). Anthropologists often gloss this phenomenon in terms of networks. Some have used spatial metaphors to denote different kinds of networks: There are both “horizontal networks” and “vertical networks” (Hoodfar 1997:229-230; Singerman 1995). Wasta can denote a vertical network that reaches into state or other powerful bureaucracies. The notion that networks created by poor women of Cairo are at the core of the political life of Egypt has been argued by political scientist Diane Singerman (Singerman 1995). In Singerman’s view, informal networks “organize, coordinate, and direct individual actions….they aggregate the interests of the sha‘ab [the people]” (ibid.:133).

Given the frequency of my informants’ talk about connections and relationships, it is not surprising that I began to analyze my findings in terms of network even during the course of my research. I thought the notion very original: I had read nothing of network theory or “network society” (Castells 1996) and was struck by the concept’s
resonance with my material. In this paper I take a different approach. I do not look at networks as an interlocking web of individuals, as a coordinator of individual interests, or as a framework for action. Instead, I analyze communicative channels that I maintain are an outcome of practices of sociality on their own terms, as a distinct object of inquiry.

There are a number of clues within and around anthropology to how such an approach might look. The first possibility is to think of channels in a way similar to how Bourdieu writes about practical reason, in terms of “beaten tracks” or “pathways that are really maintained and used” (Bourdieu 1990:35). If we take an approach common in linguistics since Jakobson, then we can think of channels as existing wherever there is physical proximity and psychological contact between a speaker and addressee that allows them to send and receive messages (Jakobson 1990 [1960]). We could also take an approach common in communications theory, where a channel usually refers to the medium used to convey information, or to transmit a signal of some kind from a transmitter to a receiver (Shannon 1948). More recent work in network theory refers to channels without the concept of a fixed transmitter or receiver and builds instead on a random network model constructed with theories from statistical physics (Franceschetti and Meester 2007:1-2).

If we recognize that channels can rest on social convention as much as a specific one-to-one physical or psychological connection, we can understand “channel” as anything that relates a signer to an interpreter “such that a sign expressed by the former may be interpreted by the latter” (Kockelman 2009). Understood in this way, we can see communicative channels as a collective resource for all kinds of semiotic communication in addition to language per se (Kockelman 2009, Elyachar 2009). And once we shift
focus away from *humans* brought together in networks to analysis of *channels* themselves as a relatively stable outcome of human practices, then different kinds of metaphors come to mind as to what this might imply. Specifically, we can think of *sets* of channels as infrastructure.

Infrastructure is something we tend to think about when it breaks down--when bridges collapse, when roads have potholes, when telephones don’t work. A new body of work on infrastructure influenced by the perspective of science and technology studies loosely conceived has shown this in varying ways (Barry 2005, 2006; Mitchell 2007; Otter 2004, 2002). The near collapse of the financial system in the United States in 2008 helped bring the question of financial infrastructures into public debate; ongoing crises in public finance have helped keep it there. Infrastructure is a classic “public good,” a set of resources available to all and the use of which does not decrease its availability to others (Samuelson 1954, Stigliz 1999). The “smell of infrastructure is the smell of the public” (Robbins 2007:26).

Economies cannot function without infrastructure. This commonplace is known in all kinds of economic theory. In Volume II of Marx’s *Capital* (1956[1885]), for example, Marx devotes a great deal of attention to how infrastructure is central to the circulation and realization of value: The creation and maintenance of infrastructure is not itself directly productive of value and yet is essential to the capitalist system of production. Nor, from the standpoint of a neoclassical theory of value, does infrastructure create price. But if you cannot link a product to the market, then that product will spoil and become worthless. If you cannot link a buyer to a seller, then a market cannot function. Infrastructure--roads, airports, ports, and bridges--allows producers to realize the
potential economic value of a product. Linking buyers and sellers entails more than physical transportation of goods in space over roads and railroads, as in classic accounts of the role of railroads in 19th century economic expansion. More is entailed than the transport of signals across telephone lines or mobile phones.

**A Madame of Infrastructure and the Potentiality of Labor**

To further develop my point, I will now turn back to ethnography and introduce Suraiya, a madame and hashish dealer in Cairo whose story I first heard as a story from one of my informants (who was himself a master storyteller). While I never was able to independently verify everything that he told Essam Fawzi and myself, Suraiya’s story was both entirely plausible and denied by no one. The story of her role in the establishment of workshops in the neighborhood where I conducted fieldwork gave me a new perspective on my fieldwork in this neighborhood and on how outcomes of women’s practices of sociality become essential infrastructure in the political economy of Cairo.

Suraiya’s main trade was in women’s bodies; she also sold hashish to her male clients. She invested her profits in productive workshops in a neighborhood on the outskirts of a middle-class neighborhood built in the early 20th century. Two of my informants were owners of workshops whose livelihood and social standing in their community Suraiya had made possible. Her name, like the source of her investment capital in these male workshops, remained veiled. Nothing indicated that the original investor in their workshops had been a madame rather than a bank or NGO loan.

Suraiya’s professional life as madame, drug dealer, and investor was at its height in the 1970s. This was the period of Anwar el-Sadat’s *infitah* or economic opening. The
word “entrepreneur” was barely heard at that time. Sadat opened up Egypt to a tidal wave of consumer goods imported from abroad. The flood of consumer goods was accompanied by a rapid change of life situation for those who latched onto the large or petty trade of consumer goods and associated paraphernalia of the high life. The economic opening also meant opening of the labor market, and the possibility of migrating for higher wage labor in the Gulf States, which they did in droves. Wages at home for skilled workers in the construction and craft trades shot up as well and lots of cash was flowing. Business for people like Suraiya took off.

As Suraiya’s business grew, she needed look-out boys to watch out for the police. So she brought in some youth (shabab) from the neighborhood. One of the boys she brought in was a nephew who would become my informant in the 1990s. Suraiya needed to do something with her profits. She also needed to buy off those who knew too much about her and could sell her out to the police. Suraiya did so by taking those pre-adolescent boys and turning them into fictive kin. She did for them what any mother would do for her sons. Just like ‘Um Ibrahim, she created material possibilities for her “sons” to become fully social men. This meant buying them workshops and homes in which they could be master, and providing them with wives. She arranged marriages for them--to her relatives and to the girls in her prostitution ring.

In time, Suraiya controlled 14 workshops. When those workshops were closed down in 1991 for urban renewal, some were moved to a new neighborhood and gained legal status. I met Suraiya’s nephew in that new neighborhood. He was by then a man well into his 40s, of full body and large smile, who liked to dress in black button-down shirts. He was known as a generous and giving man. He was not always the first to
comply with the letter of the law or to follow instructions from the local NGO about
community development. He preferred to watch out for poor people in and around the
neighborhood who needed his help. He also worked on infrastructure maintenance of a
very practical kind: When women I knew had their electricity cut off due to non-
payment, he would help them reconnect the wires to bypass the cut-off. He helped
maintain an alternative infrastructure of garbage collection as well, by staying loyal to a
young Bedouin girl whose family had been evicted from this land and who now survived
by collecting and recycling garbage. He resisted pressure from the local associations to
switch over to the formalized garbage collection system on a fee basis that they organized
with the Municipality.

He was, in short, a man of honor: he was *gada’a*, a man who looked out for others
in his neighborhood and protected those who needed help. To be *gada’a* meant as well
that he protected the collective goods and infrastructure of his community. The resources
his aunt had afforded him through the mobilization of women’s bodies had created the
possibility for his generosity and ability to maintain community resources. Suraiya had
put to work the women’s bodies she controlled, captured the surpluses, and invested
those surpluses in workshops interlinked by kin, fictive kin, wives, secrets traded and
money transferred. Suraiya translated the most physical of links into essential
infrastructure for the male productive world, which her nephew helped maintain.

Suraiya’s labor seems the opposite of that carried out by ‘Um Ibrahim. ‘Um
Ibrahim is the consummate family woman while Suraiya is a hashish dealer and madame.
But I want to argue that they had a great deal in common. Through phatic labor, both
produced and maintained sets of communicative channels in the male economic space of
the workshop. Um Ibrahim did so via her husband and son in the coffeehouse. Suraiya did so by establishing a set of new workshops interlinked through fictive kinship, run by men who helped maintain collective goods of their community. Unlike the kind of pathways referred to by Bourdieu when he writes about practical reason, or the channels modeled by Shannon for information systems, the channels Suraiya helped construct left no marks on the ground or algorithms for engineers to reproduce. Traces of these channels might have been documented in the “women’s talk” of which Usta Taha was so leery. But until the appearance of empowerment finance and new actors who took an interest in mapping out those channels, they remained an invisible infrastructure in the political economy of Cairo.

**Labor, Potentia, and the Phatic Function**

How can we characterize labor that produces outcomes such as these? It does not make sense to see ‘Um Ibrahim only as a housewife carrying out unpaid women’s labor in the home. Nor does it suffice to say that Suraiya reveals the import of prostitution in economic life and power structures in the Middle East and Asia (Dunne, n.d., Wilson 2004). We need a different way to think about the outcomes of these two women’s practices and how they relate to political economy. The same is true of the visiting and gossiping and traveling around Cairo that took up so much of my women informants’ time and which I have claimed is related to the endless talk about empowerment and the absence of women in the workshops during my fieldwork.

Unlike housework or prostitution, visiting, moving around a megacity, chatting, and consolidating friendship have not been conceptualized as labor in western social
theory. Such practices are not a form of metabolism between man and nature [through which] “men produce the vital necessities that must be fed into the life process of the human body” (Arendt 2000[1964]: 172). Nor are they work in Arendt’s sense, as that which “fabricates the sheer unending variety of things” (ibid.:173). Nor are these activities the actualization of labor-power, that reified human capacity to labor, the use of which by its purchaser in capitalism produces surplus value. Also inappropriate to capture what is at stake here is the concept of “unpaid labor” in the sense analyzed in the “value of labor-power” debate of the 1970s and 80s in feminist political economy (Agger 1998: 111-113; Jagger 1994: 97-99; Lewin 2006: 135-136). Nor were any of these social practices that took up so much of my women informants’ time understood by anyone I knew in banks, NGOs, or development organizations as having anything to do with empowerment.

The “affective turn” in social sciences (Clough 2007, Hardt 2007) opens another way to think about social practices carried out by these women that are motivated by affect and the “family ethos” of Egyptians (Wiken 1996) as much as, strictly speaking, by economic interest. Political economy has always been linked with affect—a point that was clear in the moral philosophy from which it emerged (Smith 1982[1759], Mandeville 1988[1714], Hirschmann 1997) but which got lost in its offspring of economics. The literature on affect also reminds us, via the influence of Spinoza and Marx, of the importance of the category of potentia in western political theory in a way relevant to my ethnographic material. ‘Um Ibrahim, Suraiya, and their neighbors were not carrying out any specific act of exchange, transfer of goods, or metabolism between humans and nature in their practices of sociality. Rather, they created, maintained, and extended
channels through which all kinds of resources could potentially flow. Can social practices creating potentia be considered labor?

There are grounds to think so. The category of potentia was central to Marx’s theorization of the human capacity of labor-power and how it produced surplus value under capitalism. Economics originally focused only on male productive labor but has long been expanding the scope of what it studies beyond its original focus, to the extent that some accuse the field of “economics imperialism” (Fine 2000). But by calling practices of sociality “labor” I do not mean to say that the friendliness and sociality of the Egyptian people is a kind of opportunistic functionalism. Cairene women are not pursuing instrumentally rational behavior when they go to visit friends on a public sector bus. At the same time, the outcomes of that work of forging connections is economically vital. That labor is necessary for the preservation of privilege among the upper classes. It is necessary for the preservation of life itself among the poor of Cairo, for whom this labor is both time consuming and fragile in its outcomes. Just as poor people have to contend with fragmented physical infrastructure in all aspects of their lives (Larkin 2008), they have to invest more time in the maintenance of infrastructure of communicative channels as well.

In a paper on primitive language published in 1923, Branislow Malinowski provides us with some hints about what this kind of labor might involve. When a “number of people aimlessly gossip together,” says Malinowski, a situation is created that consists “in just this atmosphere of sociability and in the fact of the personal communion of these people” (Malinowski 1936[1923]). “Each utterance is an act,” he goes on to say, that serves the aim of “binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or
other…language appears to us in this function not as an instrument of reflection but as a mode of action” (Malinowski 1936[1923:464). Malinowski’s data for his brief discussion of phatic communion concerns his informants’ engagement in face-to-face conversation in a small island community. Malinowski makes clear that what is at stake here is not “just talk.” Phatic communion is portrayed as a form of social action. Other forms of communication could be brought under the rubric of this kind of social action as well. Phatic communion in Cairo also takes place, for example, through collective “locomotory practices” in urban space that normally remain in the background of perception, but through which the collective identity of the poor masses of Cairo is both expressed and reproduced (Elyachar 2009). Such regularized if relatively unstudied forms of bodily practice and gesture are immediately recognized by others who are part of the same “semiotic community” (Kockelman 2005:261-262); they help maintain and reproduce communicative channels in Cairo.

Malinowski is more famous for his analysis of another form of social action: Inter-island kula trade carried out by elite men that required bravery, linguistic mastery, and collective memory to carry out. Trobriand men created value and fame through effecting the circulation of vaygu’a or kula shells over time across a chain of islands (Malinowski 1999[1922], Munn 1986). At numerous points in his ethnography Malinowski maintains that his analysis of kula was relevant for “us” in Victorian England as well. Most famous is perhaps his off-hand comment that the vaygu’a or kula shells coveted and traded among men in the Trobriand Islands were much like the crown jewels in Great Britain: “Ugly, useless, ungainly, even tawdry” and yet worshipped as essential to collective identity (Malinowski 1999[1922]:68).
Malinowski’s concept of phatic communion has been relatively overlooked, outside of its influence on linguistics via Roman Jakobson (Kockelman 2009). Jakobson adopted Malinowski’s concept of phatic communion to identify the “phatic function” of the speech act (Jakobson 1990[1960]). The phatic function is one of the six functions of speech event identified by Jakobson. The expressive function focuses on the speaker; the conative focuses on the addressee; the metalinguistic focuses on code; the poetic focuses on sign; the referential focuses on the object, or referent, of a speech act; and the phatic function focuses on the channel through which speech is conveyed. Despite the wide range of these functions, linguistics has generally focused on the referential function of the speech event alone (Kockelman 2005:260-261, 2009). Malinowski’s formulation of phatic communion gives us one way to think through a number of theoretical dilemmas confronting critical social analysis today.

Jakobson’s concept of channels created by the phatic function depends on both physical proximity and psychological contact of the sort discussed by Malinowski in the case of the Trobriands. In Cairo, a city of 18 million, phatic connectivity does not rely on direct physical proximity or immediate one-to-one psychological contact. As the ethnographic material I present in this paper makes clear, Cairenes have a more generalized disposition to create, maintain, and extend communicative channels than a one-to-one model of contact would allow. To make sense of this ethnographic material, we need to see the channels created by phatic labor differently—as that which relates signers to interpreters so that signs of all kinds (and not just language) expressed by the former could be immediately (even if not consciously) interpreted by the latter (Kockelman 2009).
In Cairo, the potential economic import of the outcomes of phatic communion became clearer in the 1970s and 80s during the vast waves of circular migration of millions of Egyptian men to the Gulf states. Communicative channels originally created on the streets of Cairo extended into the Gulf together with migrants and were maintained through flows of affect, money, information, and faith. Those channels were used by migrants and their families to transfer money, emotion, and news and materialized in forms as simple as a neighbor carrying an envelope and news, a friend carrying a cassette, or a fellow-worshiper carrying cash. Some of those channels were formalized in institutions like the Islamic Investment Companies that channeled a large portion of Egyptian migrants’ savings during this period, and which grew to play a key role in the political economy of the Middle East in the 1980s (until they were crushed by the Egyptian state when they were felt to be a threat). These channels were conceptualized as well in terms of the “informal economy” that became so important in the development world of the 1980s and 90s.

**Payments Space and the Story of a Phatic Pimp**

Communicative channels created through phatic labor are being studied and mobilized in new contexts. Malinowski’s model of the kula has already been adopted as a business model by Vodafone (Knight 2004); talk of the kula is important in “viral marketing” (ibid.). It has served as a concept in alternative economic projects as well (Narotzky 2008). Communicative channels are being mobilized as infrastructure in numerous projects underway to understand, format, and build on “payments space” (Maurer 2008). Throughout areas of the global South in which the vast majority of the population never
was able to access collapsing and underbuilt infrastructure, a myriad of actors are busy creating systems to support new modalities of banking and financial services to millions of poor people in the global South and members of their extended families overseas (ibid.). The notion of the “payments space” is a native term in this world of corporate, philanthropic, and academic actors.

Systems being constructed in “payments space” transform channels created by poor working people who have migrated overseas and sent money home, and who have developed all kinds of ingenious systems of transferring money, information, and affect in systems that anthropologists and development organizations have studied and supported as the “informal economy.” While microfinance focused on supporting the individual actors within that informal economy, this new focus has a much greater emphasis on uncovering, developing, and mobilizing existing forms of infrastructure created by the “bottom of the pyramid,” the world’s poorest, and building on it to create new kinds of financial and information services for profit in the global South and the North as well. A mix of corporate, philanthropic, and academic actors are involved in these projects for the creation of formalized, for-profit systems of transferring information, affect, and money across time and space. We need new conceptual tools to make sense of what is going on here, beyond condemning those practices as neoliberal or embracing them as an example of empowerment.

Phatic labor has long produced outcomes that can be compared with the laying of cables or fiber-optic lines, or the building of railroads. It has allowed for goods and use-values of different kinds to flow--if quite different use-values than those analyzed in classical political economy or Marx. The outcomes of phatic labor--communicative
channels--have allowed for the flow of reputation, information, and emotion. They have allowed for the transfer of finance and the creation of new kinds of equivalences. They have been a necessary if not sufficient condition for the realization of other, more classic forms of economic value as well. Increasingly, they are becoming recognized as a use-value, and a value, in themselves. But the process of making those channels recognizable as a support for the creation of economic value, and as an economic value in themselves, does not happen on its own. My informant Yasmin was one of many global players in this process.

Yasmin came of age in quite a different moment than Suraiya or ‘Um Ibrahim, who had been children during Abdul-Nasser’s rule. Yasmin, by way of contrast, came of age when Hosni Mubarak was President. The public sector created under Abdul-Nasser was being privatized. Disinvestment in state-owned infrastructure had become the norm. Yasmin grew up in public sector housing built by Abdul-Nasser and named after him, graduated from high school, and went to work as a secretary. Her brother was a car mechanic who had run his business on the street until he was shut down by the Municipality, after which he relocated to a new neighborhood. He sold to his sister the apartment the Municipality had given him together with a workshop. Yasmin was at home among the workshop families, since her brother was a workshop master and she was from a baladi family. But due to her employment as a secretary for a consultant, she felt herself to be more educated than her neighbors.

Yasmin was the only woman I knew in the neighborhood who held down a regular waged job. She commuted to work every day, catching a ride from one of the masters she knew through her brother, or waiting on the dusty road half a mile from her
house for the minibus to make a stop on its way to points south which had not long ago lain on the northern reaches of Cairo. Her employer had given years of his life to oppositional politics on the left and like so many who had paid a high price for their politics with their body and years in jail, made a new life for himself in the 1990s on the fringes of the development world, in consultancies, and NGOs they themselves created to catch the wave of NGO development funding. All this was in line with the old “family ethos” of Egyptians, to watch out for the future of the next generation (Wikan 1996), and to provide children with the necessities of middle class life that were increasingly monetized by the 1980s.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, Yasmin began to search for women who could be called empowered in her boss’s reports to development funders. Like Usta Taha, she took advantage of the ethnographers in her midst to seek out more names than she would have been able to uncover on her own. Who did we know in the neighborhood? Where were the women? Could we introduce her to any of our informants?

Yasmin sent out boy workers from her brother’s workshop on errands to any apartment or workshop we mentioned if there was any chance she could find a woman who could be certifiably presented as empowered through debt. Those boy workers were some of the same whose joyous runs and tired walks had made such an impression on me earlier. They had helped mark out communicative channels Yasmin now mobilized to create herself as a player in the turnover of finance capital in Egypt. The information she and Usta Taha gathered, and the reports they helped write, were then incorporated into other reports rendering coherent those initial reports. I suggest that Yasmin was here part of a vast global process of individual agents and agencies mapping out apparently
random data about who knew whom, who helped whom, who trusted whom, and who funded whom. This might all seem to be about social networks once again, but I want to argue that something else was under way.

The phatic labor of Yasmin’s neighbors and forebears had created countless nodes of connectivity within the semiotic community of Cairo. Yasmin facilitated the creation of new kinds of nodes in those channels. Those new nodes incorporated different kinds of receivers for which signs had to be translated and interpreted. The insertion of such nodes in communicative channels subtly altered the nature of social infrastructure in Cairo.

The process of uncovering channels and translating their meaning to new kinds of actors was an essential step in making legible and accessible to outsiders the social infrastructure of communicative channels that had been built up over the centuries by the phatic labor of Yasmin’s forebears.

Here it is useful to think for a moment back to Suraiya and the men of honor she helped create. As Malinowki showed us long ago, honor, fame, and value are created and reproduced through the flow of communicative resources in spacetime (Malinowski 1999[1922], Munn 1986). Fame, reputation, information, and value can be rerouted to different endpoints, and undergo material and symbolic transformations in the process. Yasmin’s phatic labor helped effect such transformations. Signals moving through channels that had been instantaneously understood by members of a semiotic community in Cairo were entering into new chains of meaning and equivalencies. Names, reputation, and gossip acquired not only use-value but value as well. In the process, channels that had not been signs or values, but rather channels along which signals and signs could
travel, were themselves becoming reshaped as a particular kind of sign--as a commodity (cf. Kockelman 2006).

If Suraiya was a procurer of women’s bodies, we might think of Yasmin as a phatic pimp. Suraiya prostituted women’s bodies. Yasmin, on the other hand, prostituted signs of women’s bodies and outcomes of phatic labor. She helped generate and transmit signs of women to new actors in an emerging political economy where channels of communicative pathways would have strategic economic value. The channels for which she provided nodes of access were empowered by Yasmin’s transformative labor. Through practices recognizable to her peers as sociality but with newly implanted “genetic” content, Yasmin made subtle but crucial shifts in the infrastructure of communicative channels in Cairo. She applied some of the lessons she learned through her experimental labor to her own family ethos as well, and opened up an NGO of her own by 2005.

**Empowering Phatic Labor**

In this paper, I have argued that empowerment was more about empowering the outcomes of women’s practices of sociality than about effecting real changes in women’s lives. Women being empowered in Cairo in the 1990s were like the dead souls of Gogol, their names harvested for the value they rendered without reference to the actual woman at all (Gogol 1997[1842]). Debates about whether or not empowerment worked and what it has achieved are, in my view, beside the point. This does not indicate failure. Something was empowered in the process of empowerment: a social infrastructure of communicative channels built through historically cultivated practices of sociality in
Cairo. The concept of phatic labor, I have argued, allows us to theorize the link between communicative practices of sociality, the creation of infrastructure, and the use of that infrastructure in economic projects oriented around a variety of goals such as the extraction of economic surplus or the capturing of community resources for collective goals.

“Infrastructure needs to be made visible,” Bruce Robbins has said, “in order to see how our present landscape is the product of past projects, past struggles…” (Robbins 2007:32). Robbins’ text reveals social struggles hidden in the invisibility of infrastructure. My point is different: unlike Robbins’ social struggles, women’s practices of sociality have never been fore-grounded as political or meaningful. Nor was it a malfunction that made us aware of a social infrastructure of communicative pathways, as is often the case with infrastructures such as sewage systems when they fail and bridges when they collapse (ibid.). The creation of new nodes in communicative channels by actors such as Yasmin was crucial here. She helped translate that which had been immediately understood by members of a semiotic community in Cairo into more explicit code that could be accessed by all. In the process, she and other agents of empowerment finance helped illuminate, as it were, communicative channels and make them available for new kinds of economic projects. Those historically constituted channels could begin to serve as infrastructure for new infrastructures, much as existing civil infrastructures such as bridges and roads can be deployed as an infrastructure for Bluetooth based health-monitoring systems (Mehta and El Zarki 2004).

Until the era of empowerment, an infrastructure of communicative channels had functioned as a kind of “semiotic commons” (Kockelman 2005:262) in the political
economy of Egypt. Communicative channels, talked about in native concepts as *wasta*, were essential for the preservation of privilege among privileged Egyptians, among whom they were relatively stable and easier to format and access through rents. Communicative channels were accessed by poor *baladi* Cairenes through different means--through shared membership in a “semiotic community” (ibid.). Members of a semiotic community shared resources of signs, gesture, thirds, and channels. Empowerment debt helped make that semiotic commons visible as a resource that could be put to other uses.

The cultivation of the channels of communication through which resources could potentially flow, I have said, was not economically motivated. Women’s practices of sociality were one kind of scale of value and then later hooked up to a monetary scale of value (Guyer 2004). This began to be clear when global interest in lending circles began in the period when the concept of “informal economy” was invented by anthropologist and social theorist Keith Hart (n.d.). The economic import of keeping channels open so that information could flow down them – information, trust, loans, money--became increasingly obvious. What began to be of interest as an anomaly or piece of exoticism about a foreign place was revealed as a strategic resource for the survival of poor people without reliance on the state. In the period of empowerment, channels themselves became of direct economic import.

Will the empowerment of communicative channels facilitate their recognition as a public good available to all, as a collective good available to some, or as a privatized infrastructure through which historically produced community resources can the more easily be exploited? Once empowered, the *potentia* of the Cairene/Egyptian popular
classes can more easily be captured by the *potestas* of global political economy/global market. But such an outcome is not inevitable. As I mentioned above, social infrastructures of communicative channels are being formatted as social ecologies for user driven telecommunications like mobile phones (Horst and Miller 2006) and as “payments space” in projects undertaken by corporations like Vodafone, Visa, Mastercard, Intel in cooperation with the Gates Foundation and other philanthropic funders (Maurer 2008). Companies like Intel and Vodafone and Visa employ ethnographers and integrate Malinowski’s theories of the kula into their business models (Banks n.d.; Knight 2004; Madrigal 2008). When corporations institute business models for telecommunications projects in the global South they find a ready-made infrastructure for their investments. That infrastructure was made visible, in part, by the work of generations of ethnographers in places like Cairo. And here I can return to some of the other dilemmas that a critical project of poor theory must encounter.

**Ethnography, Poor Theory, and the Question of Enclosure**

Ethnographic inquiry, like any project of critical inquiry, Paul Kockelman has reminded us, is a process not only of disclosure but also of enclosure (Kockelman 2009). There are many forms of enclosure, Kockelman has shown. Aesthetic enclosure can give intelligibility, form and permanence to things that are otherwise distant or murky (Bakhtin 1990, Kockelman 2009). Enclosure is evinced in sets of measures, in which we see the “enclosure of formless substances with substanceless forms” (Kockelman 2009: 304, citing Whorf 1956). Enclosure as entextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990) can be “the process of making signs seem amenable to cross-contextual interpretation”
(Kockelman 209: 304). The form of enclosure most familiar to economic anthropologists is the historical process of turning common lands into private property and peasants into proletariats that was written about most famously by Marx and Polanyi (Marx *, Polanyi *).

Research among the “poor” has entailed a great deal of disclosure and enclosure. Anthropologists have translated and rendered intelligible to outsiders cultural practices that had been a resource accessible only to those within a particular semiotic community. That translation work has helped expand the frontier of “economy” by effecting translations of forms of value. All this takes a great deal of work on part of many different actors. Outcomes of cultural practices must be “disentangled” (Callon *) from webs of mutual relations in which they are enmeshed and rendered analytically and aesthetically discrete. Inalienable possessions (Weiner *) need to be revealed as alienable, a process that not entails not only violence and dispossession but analytic labor and concept work as well.

The disclosure and enclosure we engage in as critical theorists, that is, can be a kind of analytic primitive accumulation. Such processes are long underway in any ethnographic context we study. The “abundance in what is commonly labeled poor” has already been disclosed and enclosed by social scientists, development agencies, and private firms. Does this mean that we should stop carrying out ethnography and refrain from critical inquiry? Is there no other option besides the inexorable march towards Neoliberalism on the one hand, or the hapless provision of new tools of marketization?

Outcomes of projects in payments space that build on social infrastructures of communicative pathways are still unknown. There is no inexorable march towards the
triumph of a capitalist free market (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2005). Increased recognition of a communicative commons and social infrastructure of communicative channels need not be commensurate with enclosure in the sense associated with Polanyi (1957[1944]:77-103) or the usual stories of the tragedy of the commons (Peters 1994:1-21). We know far too little about phatic labor and its outcomes to be sure of what will unfold: Much ethnographic and theoretical work remains to be done. We need not be anti-modernist enough to condemn any process of disclosure or enclosing cultural practice as value. Might not other forms of economic projects be envisioned around the collective resources and public goods that our critical inquiry can help reveal? At stake for all of us, in the UC or in Cairo or places in between, is the need to sharpen our thinking about the meaning and content of these goods that lie on the boundaries of the world of commodities. With the discrediting of the tenets of free market Neoliberalism in the financial crash of 2008, much conceptual work remains to be done. In Cairo, in all the places where women remained absent from male productive space, visiting back and forth across the reaches of megacities crammed with traffic, gossiping with friends, sending letters to husbands and sons transported across borders to labor; an infrastructure was being created through phatic labor that remains a collective good. Whether it is privatized or rendered public is still an open question, tenuous as it might be.
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1 I am indebted to my interlocutor Paul Kockelman for suggesting I turn to the concept of phatic communion to think about my material in Cairo and for coining the term “phatic labor” in an email exchange about an earlier version of this paper.

2 I am indebted to an anonymous review of *American Ethnologist* for reminding me of this point.

3 There is an important body of literature in anthropology on sexuality and prostitution. For a sample the interested reader can turn to Dunne (n.d.), Kandiyoti (1994), Wilson (2004).

4 Those practices do, however, create something of that which “constitutes the human artifice, the world we live in” (Arendt 2000: 173), if we understand artifice to include communicative channels.

5 In Weber’s classic formulation, social action is action where “the actor’s behavior is meaningfully oriented to that of others” (Weber 1978[1956]:23).

6 My Ph.D. dissertation project was originally on the circular migration of Egyptians to the Gulf States and its impacts on the production of urban space in Cairo. I draw from some of my research outcomes in the paragraph that follows (Elyachar 1995, 1993).